DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 703 CG 022 284

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TITLE	Counselors and Teachers as Student Advisors. Highlights: An ERIC/CAPS Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services, Ann Arbor, Mich.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	90
CONTRACT	RI88062011
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CAPS, 2108 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Counselor Teacher Cooperation; Curriculum Design; Elementary Secondary Education; *Guidance Programs; Program Descriptions; School Guidance; *Teacher Guidance; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Myrick (Robert); *Teacher Advisor Program

ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the essential aspects of Myrick's Teacher Advisor Program (TAP) concept, discussing: (1) why schools need a teacher advisor program; (2) whether teachers are qualified to provide counseling; (3) what a teacher advisor program would involve; (4) what should be included in a guidance curriculum; (5) the counselor's role in TAP; (6) teacher support of TAP; and (7) the advantages and limitations of teachers as advisors. (TE)

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HIGHLIGHTS ...An ERIC/CAPS Digest

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Counselors and Teachers as Student Advisors

Overview

Amid all the recent flurry of state and national reports calling for educational reform initiatives to raise academic standards, add course requirements, require competency testing, and otherwise upgrade the quality of our schools, very little attention has been given to the need for improved guidance and counseling services. Yet effective learning can take place only within a supportive environment, of which developmental guidance is a crucial component.

When students have problems, they turn to those whom they know the best, and who they think can help the most. Surveys have shown that the adults to whom students of all ages are most likely to turn, after their parents, are teachers. A teacher advisor program (TAP) is therefore one very effective way of directly involving teachers in developmental guidance.

Why Do Schools Need a Teacher Advisor Program?

In most schools, there are far from enough school counselors or others specialists to provide a comprehensive program for developmental guidance.

As it is, counselors' hands are normally full as a result of dealing with high-risk students who have special needs or emotional problems, and most other students are lucky if they can gain access to a counselor more than a few times during a school year. Yet all students, especially at the middle school level, need the support of a friendly adult who cares about them personally; someone they can confide in, who can help them deal with the problems of growing up, keeping up with their studies, and planning their careers.

Are Teachers Qualified to Provide Counseling?

Although they may lack the professional training of counselors, school teachers have a long tradition of helping students with personal problems. They also interact with the students daily, and thus are in an excellent position to provide personal direction. In fact, effective teachers share many of the same traits as effective counselors: ability to empathize with students, patience and flexibility, excellent interpersonal skills, openness to new ideas, and awareness of individual differences. Good teachers also habitually promote and sustain positive group interaction in their classes, and develop a helping relationship with both students and parents. In all these ways, the teacher's role is closely allied to that of the counselor.

Elementary school teachers, who work closely with young children in a single classroom, generally accept the idea that developmental guidance is an integral part of their responsibility to students. But middle and secondary school teachers work with a larger number of students and usually spend no more than an hour a day with each class. Because their teaching is limited to specialized fields, they tend to emphasize academic skills, and have little time to spend getting to know their students or talking about students' needs, interests, or problems. Yet adolescents at the middle and high school level need personal attention and guidance as much as, if not more than, young children. A trusted high school teacher is often the student's first choice as someone to turn to in discussing personal problems.

What Would a Teacher Advisor Program Involve?

Teachers, especially in middle schools and high schools, often feel so overwhelmed with their schedules and responsibilities that they do not have the time to build close personal relationships with their students. To be successful, a teacher advisor program must therefore be incorporated as a part of the regular curriculum. One popular approach has been to assign each teacher 15–20 advisees, and to arrange regular "homebase" or "homeroom" periods of 25–30 minutes at the beginning of each school day. The teacher then devotes at least two sessions per week to developmental guidance activities, during which students can explore their personal interests, goals, and concerns with a supportive group of peers. Teacher-advisors also hold regular student and parent conferences and keep track of their advisees' academic progress, consulting with other teachers, school counselors, and support personnel.

What Should Be Included in a Guidance Curriculum?

A developmental guidance curriculum can be structured to include units that focus on the following themes:

- getting acquainted/orientation
- study skills and habits
- self-assessment
- communication skills
- decision-making and problem-solving
- peer relationships
- motivation
- conflict resolution
- personal hygiene and wellness
- career awareness and development
- educational planning
- community involvement

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These units may be organized sequentially according to a school guidance calendar and the major events of the school year. For example, orientation and study skills units would be scheduled early in the year to allow students to get to know the school and one another, and to get off on the right track academically. A self-assessment unit would follow, enabling the students to map out their personal strengths and identify the areas where they need to grow. While some of these topics can be covered in a single class period (such as "getting acquainted"), others can become recurrent focal points for group discussion, such as motivation, conflict resolution, communication skills, and study skills.

Some sessions should be carefully structured to build group cohesiveness or to introduce important developmental concepts. Other sessions should be left open-ended, allowing discussion to focus on students' particular interests and needs.

What Is the Counselor's Role in TAP?

Although some teachers and counselors alike fear that TAP is simply a strategy for getting teachers to take over counselors' work, it is important to emphasize that teacher-advisors can never be a substitute for professional school counselors. Rather, in a well-designed program, the respective roles of teachers and counselors must be clearly identified. An understanding needs to be reached, for example, that teachers will refer students with special needs to counselors, instead of attempting to handle students' complex emotional or behavioral problems on their own.

Teachers can also collaborate with counselors by inviting them to address their classes on special topics; such visits will create a visible bond between teachers and counselors, and thus dissuade students from attempting to play one off against the other. Furthermore, counselors can assist teachers who are having trouble managing their groups by modeling group guidance skills and serving as consultants to the teachers. In fact, counselors often assume leadership roles in TAP, coordinating the teachers and providing resources for them.

Will Teachers Support TAP?

In spite of the advantages of a Teacher Advisor Program, many teachers are reluctant to support such a program, because they are either skeptical about its utility or wary of the extra preparation that such a program would involve. Robert D. Myrick estimates, for example, that in most schools 20% of the teachers would immediately support such a program while 20% would be strongly opposed. It is therefore important to move the middle 60% toward supporting TAP and developmental guidance.

If most teachers are to support a Teacher Advisor Program, they must clearly understand and embrace the essential concepts of developmental guidance underlying the program and the curricular goals. They also need preparation in guidance and interpersonal skills, so that they can effectively facilitate class discussions that help students think about personal problems and explore alternative courses of action.

Second, if a TAP is to be anything more than a formality, the time commitment needs to be adequate. Group meetings of once a week or less are not likely to allow valuable helping relationships between teachers and their advisees to develop, nor do they give teachers the opportunity to establish continuity or consistency. TAP works best when it is scheduled every school day, or at least two or three times a week; otherwise, teachers tend to view TAP as an added encumbrance, peripheral to their major duties.

Besides an adequate allotment of time, TAP also must have a developmental guidance curriculum with clearly articulated objectives, and with supporting materials and activities that can stimulate student participation. If teachers have an organized guidance handbook, which they are at liberty to follow, adapt, or modify as they see fit, they are more likely to "buy into" the guidance program as a whole.

Finally, teachers need to be assured of full support and cooperation from both the administration and the counseling staff, so that they won't feel as if the burden of student guidance has been unfairly shifted to their shoulders. For this reason, TAP should be monitored and evaluated by students, teachers, counselors, and administrators every year to ensure that the program is meeting its goals.

What Are the Advantages and Limitations of Teachers as Advisors?

Teacher Advisor Programs compensate for the high counselor-student ratios that make it impossible for school counselors to know all students personally. But beyond this compensatory role, TAP strengthens teacher-student relationships and creates a supportive learning environment in which teachers and counselors can work together to respond to students' academic and personal needs.

The major disadvantage of Teacher Advisor Programs is that not all teachers are able or willing to work effectively with students in an advisory role. Such programs are therefore often viewed as a passing fad or an infringement on academic time.

To be successful, a Teacher Advisor Program must therefore have a clearly defined purpose, reflected in a well-conceived curriculum, and it must enlist the full support of administrators, teachers, and counselors alike.

Resources

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062011. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.